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SUBJECT: INFLUENTIAL MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT HUSSEIN ALI AL-SHALAN'S
VIEWS ON THE WAY FORWARD

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Influential sheik and COR member Al-Shalan sees South Central as crucial to Iraq's future. Security situation improving. He fears a weakened Sadr militia will increase influence of Badrists, who "have an agenda beyond Iraq's borders." He believes that Islamists are incapable of positive political contribution and that at present tribal roles are crucial to Iraq's future. End Summary.

¶2. (C) PRT Diwaniyah Team Leader met November 9 at the REO with Member of Parliament Hussein Ali al-Shalan, one of Iraq's most influential tribal sheiks and an independent MP from South Central Iraq, to discuss his views on the current political climate and ways forward. As a "partner and friend," al-Shalan came "to extend [his] hand to ensure success of the Mission in Iraq." As leader of the al-Shalan tribe, he has the loyalty of a million Iraqis and relations with all of the tribes.

South Central's Importance

¶3. (C) Al-Shalan believes that the South Central region has been and continues to be is the heart of Iraq and that modern Iraq was "born" here. Al-Shalan lamented Diwaniyah's current security situation and lack of economic and social development, emphasizing that Diwaniyah has been short changed, despite the area's historical national contributions.

Views on Security

¶4. (C) Although the area's security situation is not what he would like, al-Shalan said that there has been recent improvement in Diwaniyah due to coalition force efforts. Al-Shalan is concerned that militias dominate local political parties and that criminal elements are strong in Diwaniyah. At the same time, al-Shalan believes that USG policy has been too subservient to the GOI. He worries that when U.S. forces prepare to take more aggressive action against the militias, the Maliki government urges restraint for domestic political reasons.

Distrusts Badrists

¶5. (S) Al-Shalan voiced particular warning about the local Badr militia. As coalition forces weaken the Sadr militia (JAM), a strong militia linked with the Badrists, "with an agenda beyond Iraq's border," will fill the vacuum. As JAM's strength is weakened in Diwaniyah, al-Shalan believes Badr will

be relatively strengthened, and he believes this is something that should be prepared for.

¶6. (C) Although he has a very different political agenda and despite his concerns with the Badrists, al-Shalan has a good working relationship with Qadisiyah Governor al-Khudari, a strong Badrist. Interestingly, despite al-Khudari's highly contentious relations with the province's Agricultural Union, which coalition forces strongly support through its distribution of seed, fertilizer and machinery, al-Shalan reports that al-Khudari told him three days ago that al-Khudari could work with the Agricultural Union. Al-Shalan believes, however, that al-Khudari and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI)/Badr feel so isolated and under pressure in Diwaniyah that the Governor is reaching out to al-Shalan out of desperation rather than conviction. Al-Shalan noted that ISCI leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim has visited Diwaniyah four times in recent months and that everything al-Khudari does in Diwaniyah can be seen through the narrow prism of the Governor's desire to secure electoral advantage for ISCI/Badr.

Islamists Cannot Make a Positive Contribution

¶7. (C) Al-Shalan is also pessimistic about Islamist parties and their ability to become positive contributors to a pluralistic Iraq. Islamists "are conditioned to receive, not to give" and will "never be able to share power in Iraq" except under certain narrow, unfulfillable conditions.

Tribal Role Crucial to Iraq's Future

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¶8. (C) Al-Shalan urged the USG "to identify real leaders and real partners to whom we can look for real friendship." Al-Shalan expressed strong support for a pluralistic, democratic Iraq under the current constitution. He urged the USG to capitalize on the ability of the area's tribes to effect positive change. Al-Shalan noted, however, that, at this time, one of the two dominant area tribes, the Agra tribe, is less effective due to splintered leadership.

¶9. (C) As he looked optimistically to Iraq's future, al-Shalan said that the tribes, who view themselves as important and relevant, will search for a place at the political table. One day, in a fully functioning Iraq, the tribes will operate within political structures and not tribal affiliations, but that day has not yet arrived, he believes.

¶10. (C) Finally, when asked about Eighth Iraq Army Division Commander General Uthman, al-Shalan spoke highly of him as a good friend but said that we "must have other sources in Diwaniyah" because, on tribal matters, Uthman's brother takes care of tribal business.

Comments

¶11. (C) Al-Shalan obviously has strong views on the country's future direction. He dismisses the JAM as anything anyone could work with and has a deep distrust of the ISCI/Badr. In fact, we believe that al-Shalan is only slightly less concerned with Badr forces than with the JAM.

¶12. (S) The al-Shalan family's influence dates back centuries, in Iraq. Al-Shalan's grandfather was the Speaker of the Majlis Al A'ayan (House of Notables) in the early part of the last century. Al-Shalan has a close relationship with the House of Saud, notwithstanding that al-Shalan is Shi'a. Al-Shalan said that PM Maliki uses him as a bridge when he wants to reach out

to the tribes. His family has several generations of relations with the Al-Hakim family, even though their political agendas differ. As a senior tribal leader, al-Shalan had a naturally strong relationship with Sheik Abu Resha as well as with his brother, Sheik Ahmed. Not surprising, he strongly approves of the work that has brought the Anbar and Karbala sheiks together.

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